

Recommendations for the Review of the Maine Learning Results

December 2005

Christine Chmura, Megan Manning,
Margaret Kinney, Jemma Stromwick, Caroline Walker

Bates College Undergraduates
Lewiston, Maine

Recommendations for the MLR Review

Schools have a civic responsibility to equip students with the skills and experience necessary to become active, informed and involved citizens in the community. An important part of the Maine Learning Results (MLRs) is to prepare Maine students for the three C's – college, career, and citizenship. In the past the MLRs have focused more heavily on preparing students for college and careers and we feel that citizenship has been largely overlooked. Although civic education is clearly written into the guiding principles and as a section in the social studies standards, the standards are not written keeping in mind the importance of each student's participation in his or her community. For students to truly understand their roles as citizens, civic education needs to be integrated into all parts of the curriculum.

Developing a Civic Core

The Executive Summary of The Citizenship and Education Task Force Subcommittee defines citizenship education in terms of three components; **knowledge**, **cognitive skills**, and **attitudes and beliefs**. Currently, the knowledge portion seems to be the primary focus of citizenship and with all the knowledge that teachers are currently asked to cover, there is no time for them to consider the skills and disposition portion of citizenship education. In order to better balance the three components, we feel that the state needs to further define the essential material.

Paul Gagnon suggests that in order to better define the material, states should create standards around a “civic core” of foundational knowledge. Gagnon outlines five criteria that he defines as making standards strong in terms of a civic core. These five

criteria, taken directly from Gagnon (2003), are presented below in question format, followed by Gagnon's ranking of Maine for each criterion:

1 – Are the essentials of a civic core specified clearly?

Maine partially meets the criteria.

2 – Are the topics teachable within the allotted timeframe?

Maine does not meet the criteria.

3 – Do the documents provide scope and sequence?

Maine partially meets the criteria.

4 – Is the essential content required of all students?

Maine does not meet the criteria.

5 – Are the important facts and ideas presented coherently across subjects?

Maine does not meet the criteria.

[See appendix A for more information]

When evaluating standards in terms of these civic core criteria, it's essential for the state to question what is achievable. Serious time constraints within the school year create a need for the state to recognize and reevaluate the broad and all encompassing nature of the current standards.

We, along with Gagnon, argue that **less is more**. We would like to see the state refine the standards in order to make clear what it considers to be essential, keeping in mind time constraints within schools. By creating more defined standards, the state would be providing teachers with **LESS** overall material, which gives teachers **MORE** flexibility and time.

Ohio Grade Level Indicators

A strong example of clear state standards that are written in such a way as to provide sequence and scope are the **Ohio State Standards**. These standards provide benchmarks that are similar to the current Maine state standards, which are identified by

grade clusters (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-10, and 11-12). However, in order to better clarify and map out how these benchmarks should be met by the end of the cluster, there are grade-level indicators. Ohio presents a benchmark for a cluster and then outlines the steps that should be taken at each grade in order to meet that benchmark. For example:

Benchmark for 6-8: Show the relationship between civic participation and attainment of civic and public goals.

Grade Level Indicator for Sixth Grade: Explain how opportunities for citizens to participate in and influence the political process differ under various systems of government.

Grade Level Indicator for Seventh Grade: Explain how the participation of citizens differs under monarchy, direct democracy, and representative democracy.

Grade Level Indicators for Eighth Grade:

1) Show the relationship between participating in civic and political life and the attainment of individual and public goals, including:

A – The Sons of Liberty and Committee of Correspondence/American Independence;

B – The Underground Railroad and the abolitionist movement/abolition of slavery.

2) Explain how the opportunities of civic participation expanded during the first half of the 19th century including:

A – Nominating conventions

B – Expansion of the franchise

C - Active campaigning

We recognize the arguments against the state becoming more specific in the state standards, but we feel that by providing a more prescriptive set of standards, the local districts and teachers will have more time and resources to divert elsewhere. The local level, having already been given clearly defined essentials, can develop creative and unique ways to both teach the material and to assess the essentials set forth by the state.

Participatory Language

By more clearly defining the civic core teachers will have more time to emphasize the skills and disposition necessary for meaningful civic education. Hawaii

has Social Studies standards that not only assess civic knowledge, but also the motivation and participation of students.

The Hawaiian Department of Education expects that “All Hawaiian school graduates will... exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (Hawaii Department of Education). Hawaii’s standards state that “students have the opportunity to debate positions on issues regarding the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and come to a consensus on the issues, take action to gain larger community involvement on the issues.” We believe that Maine should adopt this type of participatory language when writing standards because it allows students to be active in their learning. A service learning project, which takes what the students are learning in the classroom and applies it to a real life setting, can be used to encourage a student’s participation. The student’s civic knowledge, skills and disposition can be assessed as a result of the service learning project they complete.

[See appendix B for examples]

Integration across Subjects

Civic engagement can be put into all aspects of the curriculum as a way to apply what the students are learning to their daily lives. Nebraska State Standards Pilot Project is a strong example of an integrated approach to civic education through its usage of their Character Education (CE) component suggested after each standard. For example, a first grade math standard states:

1.1.2: By the end of first grade, students will demonstrate ways of representing numbers and compare relations among numbers.

Example CE Integration: Fairness in sharing parts of a whole (halves are the same size, etc.) Honesty in dividing an object or several objects so they are equal. Caring in giving more or the bigger item to someone and

keeping less for yourself.

This method allows teachers to easily connect civics to the curriculum in an engaged manner that relates to the students' lives. As a result, civic education will become a standard practice and students will recognize interconnecting themes. This will allow them to continue looking for connections and learning long after they have graduated.

Assessment Dictates the Essentials

Maine needs standards and assessment methods that examine students' civic knowledge, motivation and participation in the local community. In her report, *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten through Grade 12*, Judith Tourney-Purta states, "We can learn a great deal about the standards, and what they mean as a result of the way they are assessed. As a result proper testing and assessment methods are critical to the success of any citizenship education program, because they emphasize the important values of the learning" (8). The goal of citizenship education is to get students to apply and utilize their knowledge in real world situations and life experiences (Tourney-Purta, 10).

Assessing Participation and Motivation

Assessment should be a continuation of a student's learning. This should be located both inside and outside the classroom and situated within the community. The assessment of civic knowledge and participation needs to be made by the local communities and districts, the people who know the needs and abilities of the students and the community best. When assessment is done this way, the local curriculum is not driven by outside sources. As a result, learning becomes relevant and more meaningful to

the students' lives. Some examples of how this can be accomplished are (Kids Consortium, 62):

- Portfolios that track a students progress throughout the year.
- Group work or projects that encourage collaboration with other class members.
- Presentations to community members.
- Multimedia projects.

To further accentuate the variety of multi-faceted, non-standardized assessment methods, a section should be added to the Preface of the MLR. This section should address creative practices and direct readers to sources like Kids Consortium and the Best Practices Subcommittee of the Citizenship Education Task Force for exemplary ideas.

ADDENDUM

We recognize that service-learning is only one aspect of civic education. However, due to our experiences working with service learning in the classroom, as well as researching its benefits, we decided to suggest one possible method that would encourage Maine Public Schools to adopt service learning as one means of integrating civic education into their curriculums.

State Support of Service-Learning Programs

In order to provide the means and motivation for schools to utilize service-learning as an effective teaching tool, it is recommended that the state will set up a system where schools willing to integrate service-learning programs into their curriculum will receive additional funding from the Maine Department of Education (DOE). One possible system to achieve this goal could include **an annual allocation of funds, by the Maine Department of Education, for service-learning start-up grants. Each year, interested schools will be able to apply for these grants.**

Attached to this recommendation will be a one page memo written to the Maine DOE to explain this recommendation. It will include:

- Why the state government (through the Maine DOE) should be involved.
- Why and for what the additional funding is needed.
- Explanation of why service-learning should be encouraged and supported in Maine's public schools.

There are several reasons why the Maine DOE¹ should provide financial encouragement for schools to start up service-learning programs; and why the MLR Review Committee should encourage them to do so.

- “State policymakers are interested in seeing students become productive and responsible members of society.” And several studies have shown that service-learning helps students “become more knowledgeable about career options”, and develop “a greater sense of civic responsibility and commitment to serve” (Learning that Lasts 23).
- It is a means for the state to demonstrate their support for the integration of service learning into the curriculum.

¹ It is realized that state policy makers are only one actor of many of the entire education system, and that all actors, including teachers, school administrators and other key players, will need to play a role in promoting service-learning in the classroom. For more information on the role other actors need to play, please refer to *Learning that Lasts: How Service-Learning Can Become an Integral Part of Schools, States and Communities* – which can be found at <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/40/54/4054.pdf>.

- “The endorsement of state policymakers can mean increased visibility and credibility for service-learning among all constituents” (30).

Research has shown that “many service-learning efforts begin exclusively with grant funding” (25). The funding that schools would receive from these start-up grants could be used for a variety of much-needed resources - such as postage materials for a letter writing campaign or gardening tools for a community garden project

Service-learning should be encouraged and supported in Maine’s schools due to its unique ability to accomplish many of the goals outlined in our recommendations for integrating civic education into the Maine Learning Results. Projects have the capacity to:

- provide the knowledge deemed to be necessary for the civic core;
- be defined as “participatory”;
- integrate different subject areas; and
- provide an alternative means through which students’ civic participation and motivation can be assessed.

One key source which provides examples of service-learning projects is Community Lessons: Promising Curriculum Practices, by Julie Bartsch and contributing teachers.

References:

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<http://doe.k12.hi.us/standards/>
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http://www.ode.state.oh.us/academic_content_standards/
- Tourney-Purta, Judith and Susan Vermeer. *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten through Grade 12: A Background for Policy Makers and Educators*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the State, 2004.

Appendix A:

Paul Gagnon's Rating of Maine

Criterion 1: Are the essentials of a civic core specified clearly?

-“It has clear language and a number of specifics, meeting Criterion #1 in small part. But the specifics are mostly examples and too few for a common core of learning”

Criterion 2: Are the topics teachable within the allotted timeframe?

-“Criterion #2, is not met; although what is here could perhaps be taught in school time available, it would not make for well-rounded citizenship education.”

Criterion 3: Do the documents provide scope and sequence?

-“Criteria #3 is partly met through a sequence of learning in grade spans”

Criterion 4: Is the essential content required of all students?

-“Criterion #4 is not met since it is unclear that topics are to be offered to all students.”

Criterion 5: Are the important facts and ideas presented coherently across subjects?

-“Contrary to the premises of its introduction and the idea of a common core, the document also fails to meet Criterion #5. It does not integrate the separate subjects to convey or dramatize the complexity of human experience.”

Appendix B:

Examples of Participatory Language in the Maine Learning Results

(original language taken from the Social Studies Section of the MLR)

CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT

A. RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND PARTICIPATION

MIDDLE GRADES 5-8

1. Identify and display the characteristics of an effective citizen.
2. Evaluate and ~~defend~~ debate positions on current issues regarding individual rights and judicial protection.

CIVICS AND GOVERNMENT

Students will learn the constitutional principles and the democratic foundations of national, state, and local systems and institutions. Further, students will learn how to exercise the rights and responsibilities of participation in civic life and to analyze and evaluate public policies. This understanding entails insight into political power, how it is distributed and expressed, the types and purposes of governments, and their relationships with the governed. Political relationships among the United States and other nations are also included in this content area.

A. RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND PARTICIPATION

Students will understand the rights and responsibilities of civic life and employ the skills of effective civic participation.

B. PURPOSE AND TYPES OF GOVERNMENT

Students will understand the types and purposes of governments, their evolution, and their relationships with the governed. Students will witness these things first hand through in class elections and debates.

C. FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT AND CONSTITUTIONS

Students will understand and debate the constitutional principles and the democratic foundations of the political institutions of the United States.

D. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Students will understand the political relationships among the United States and other nations.

